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Linking Assessment and Instruction Conferencing

The word assessment . . . derives from the Latin word assidere, meaning to sit alongside. This is a useful metaphor for assessment, particularly in the classroom.
—PRTER H. JOHNSTON, Knowing Literacy

When my wife, Robin, was four months pregnant with our second child, I accompanied her to her doctor's office for one of her periodic ultrasounds. Since her pregnancy was far enough along that the ultrasound could reveal the sex of the baby, Robin and I decided beforehand that we would like to know if we were going to have a boy or a girl.

Throughout the examination, I watched carefully. It wasn't that hard to figure out what the nurse was doing. With one hand, she was moving the ultrasound scanner along Robin's belly. With her other hand, she was using a mouse to position a cursor at different points on the image of the baby on the monitor. At each point she clicked on the mouse, and then used it to draw a line to another point on the image where she clicked again, completing the line. The computer then calculated the length of whatever part of the baby's body the nurse had

just measured.

For the life of me, however, I couldn't tell what I was looking at on the monitor. I could make out vague shapes that momentarily resembled a limb or spine or head, but more often I felt as if I were watching one of those lava lamps from the 1960s. I saw nothing that would indicate whether the baby was a boy or a girl.

When she finished the exam, the nurse said, "From these measurements, it appears that your baby is fifteen and a half weeks old. I'm also 99.5 percent sure of your baby's sex. Do you want to know?" Robin and I nodded. The nurse pointed to a white blob on the screen. "You see this? This is your baby's behind." As I stared at the blob, I suddenly could see that I was indeed staring at the baby's rear end (and I wondered how many times I would be clean-

ing that part of the baby's anatomy during the next several years!). Then the nurse pointed to two other, thinner blobs. "And these are the baby's legs." As I stared at the two thinner blobs, I suddenly saw that I was staring at the baby's legs. "Now look between the legs," the nurse commanded, pointing to a tiny blob in that region. I stared at this blob, not comprehending. The nurse chuckled when she saw the look of puzzlement on my face. Finally she announced, "It's a boy! Congratulations!"

Recently, I've begun to tell this story in workshops based on my first book, *How's It Going? A Practical Guide to Conferring with Student Writers* (2000). In the book (and in the workshops), I focus on what to do in a writing conference with a student. While thousands of teachers have told me they find this how-to information very useful, many of them have also expressed frustration that they still aren't sure what they're supposed to be looking for when they're conferring with a child about her writing. And when they finally do see something, they're not sure how to assess it to help them decide what to teach the child.

Just as I was able to figure out pretty quickly the mechanics of what the nurse was doing during the ultrasound, it's not really that hard to grasp the how-to of a writing conference. But just as I had trouble figuring out what I was seeing on the ultrasound monitor, figuring out what to look for and then making sense of what we're seeing are the hardest challenges in a conference. The most difficult part of conferring is assessing our student writers.

How to Conduct Effective Writing Conferences⁵

Writing conferences—the one-on-one conversations we have with students while their classmates are busy writing—are the most important teaching opportunities we have in the writing workshop. When we confer with children, we're able to differentiate our instruction and fulfill the promise of writing workshop: that we will be able to tailor our teaching to each child's individual needs as a writer.

To have an effective writing conference with a student, we need to be familiar with a few important concepts.

5. If you've read one or more professional books on conferring with student writers—which include my own book *How's It Going?* (2000), Douglas Kaufman's *Conferences and Conversations* (2000), and Lucy Calkins, Amanda Hartman, and Zoe White's *Conferring Handbook* (2003) and *One to One: The Art of Conferring with Young Writers* (2005)—you may want to skip this section.

A Writing Conference Is a Conversation About How to Become a Better Writer

Since I launched my first writing workshop nineteen years ago, I have thought of writing conferences as conversations. The word *conversation* suggests the way I believe we should talk with students about their writing—the kind of personal, intimate talk we have with friends and colleagues. Even though we're teachers talking with students, we're also writers talking to writers. In *A Writer Teaches Writing* (1985), Don Murray explains, "[Conferences] are not mini-lectures but the working talk of fellow writers sharing their experience with the writing process" (148).

What are these conversations about? is the crucial question teachers ask me about conferring. Our conferences will go well if we—and our students—know why we're having them.

The point of writing conferences, ultimately, is to help students become lifelong writers. In conferences, we help students write for purposes and audiences important to them, acquire a working knowledge of what it means to write well, and develop more effective writing processes, in the hope they'll make use of what we teach them in the future. In *The Art of Teaching Writing* (1994), Lucy Calkins says that our challenge in conferences is to stay focused on the students and on their growth as writers: "If we can keep only one thing in mind—and I fail at this half the time—it is that we are teaching the writer and not the writing. Our decisions must be guided by 'what might help this writer' rather than 'what might help this writing'" (228).

When we finish a conference, we should be able to name one thing we taught the student to help her or him become a better writer. We want to be able to say, "I taught Madeline a strategy for figuring out the spelling of an unfamiliar word," or "I helped Terrence learn how to write strong topic sentences," or "I helped Dominique learn about a new purpose for writing."

Consider the following conference, which I had with Smith, a sixth grader. Smith has been writing a personal essay called "Losing Spanish" (his first draft is shown in Figure 7.1). Smith and his classmates have read several personal essays and noticed that in this genre, writers explore an idea by writing about some of their life experiences. As you read this conference, in which Smith and I discuss revisions that he could make to his first draft, try to figure out the one thing I taught Smith to help him become a better writer.

Me: How's it going?

Smith: Fine.

Me: What are you doing?

Smith: Writing an essay about forgetting how to speak bilingual.

Losing Spanish
When I came from school I showed my mom my homework. But then I realize that I was talking english only. And was suprize that I wasn't Bi-lingual anymore. Bi-lingual is when you know two language.
The problem is that I might not speak with my family. My mom my cusins and my friends my sister can speak english but I like spanish.

FIGURE 7.1 Smith's First Draft

Me: Uh-huh. Tell me more about that.
SMITH: That if I don't be bilingual anymore, I can't talk to my whole family.
Me: So you're telling a story about a time that you were speaking in English and forgot how to speak in Spanish?
SMITH: Yeah. When I was explaining my homework to my mom.
Me: And how did she react?
SMITH: Kind of weird . . . kind of lonely.
Me: So you're writing about a change in you that makes you worry about your relationships with your family?
SMITH: Yeah.
Me: What are you doing with your essay today?
SMITH: I'm making corrections.
Me: Are you editing—checking spelling and punctuation—or are you revising—adding to your draft, moving parts around?
SMITH: Adding.
Me: So you're revising.
SMITH: Yeah.
Me: Tell me more about what you mean by revising.
SMITH: I'm adding some more new stuff.
Me: What do you mean by "stuff"?
SMITH: Like the important parts that happened.
Me: You're trying to add more to the important parts? [*Smith nods.*]
That's very smart that you said that you know there are some important parts that you want to stretch out. Let me take a look at your draft. [*I read it through.*] I have a question for you, Smith. What do you want me to understand after I read your finished essay?
SMITH: That problems can happen if you forget how to speak your other language.

ME: You want us to know that learning a second language can cause problems with your family. And you said you wanted to stretch the important parts. Hmm . . . I see that your piece has a story—what happened when you showed your mom your homework—and an idea that learning a second language can cause problems with your family. Good personal essays have both of these parts, a story and an idea . . . One thing I'm noticing about your essay is that you wrote three sentences in the story about you and your mom and the homework.

SMITH: Yeah, that's right.

ME: If people reading this are really going to understand what you're saying about losing Spanish, this story is really important. In a personal essay, the stories help readers understand the ideas. And in writing, you need to stretch the parts that help readers understand what you're trying to say. When I read your essay, I need to be in the room with you and your mom if I'm going to understand the problem, because I'm not bilingual. Let's try this together right now. Tell me more about you and your mom and the homework.

SMITH: [After thinking for a moment] My mom was kind of surprised, because I used to talk a lot when I was tiny.

ME: You used to talk a lot in Spanish when you were smaller. How did your mom react now?

SMITH: Her eyes . . . she started glaring at me and I started glaring back.

ME: Did she say anything to you?

SMITH: Yeah. She said something in Spanish, but I don't want to say it.

ME: Can you kind of translate, but in a way that's OK for me to hear?

SMITH: She said, "Oh, my son, what's wrong with you?"

ME: How did you feel when she said that?

SMITH: Kind of embarrassed, because I always like to talk Spanish.

ME: That's really powerful. It must be a hard story to tell, right?

SMITH: Yeah.

ME: I'd like you to do some writing now. Instead of just three sentences, see if you can tell the story of you and your mom and the homework with more sentences, just like you were telling me. The better you tell that story, the better I'm going to understand what you're trying to tell me about losing Spanish. [Smith nods.] You're grappling with something that's really powerful. Your idea about losing Spanish will really come across better if you stretch this story in your essay. OK?

SMITH: Yeah.

ME: Go for it.

Losing Spanish

One day when I was doing my homework I was finished, so then I was explaining my homework to my mom I couldn't explain a word. I felt like I wasn't Bi-lingual any more.

Then I realize that I was talking english only but then my mom was suprized. My mom was glaring at me and I glared back. I ran back to my room and slam the door shut. I thought for a while and saw that if I can't talk spanish I wouldn't talk with my family.

FIGURE 7.2 Smith's Revision

The one thing I taught Smith in this conference to help him become a better writer is that it's important to develop the parts of a piece that help him make his point. In a personal essay, this means developing the story (or stories). And that's exactly what Smith did (see Figure 7.2).

There Is a Predictable Structure in a Writing Conference

When I've observed teachers who are good at conferencing, I've noticed that there is a structure to their conversations. Because these teachers know in general how they want their conversations with students to go—as do the students, once they've taken part in several of them—the talk flows easily and naturally, with both the teacher and the student holding up their end.

The conference conversation has two parts, both of which grow from the underlying purpose of helping students become better writers. In each part, the teacher and student have certain roles (see Figure 7.3).

The First Part

In the first part of a conference, we talk with students about what they're doing as writers. That is, we talk with them about why they're writing and for whom, about what they're doing to write well, and/or about their writing process. During this talk, which Lucy Calkins (1994; Calkins, Hartman, and White 2003, 2005) describes as the "research" part of a conference, we find our assessment focus. We have four responsibilities:

The Role of the Teacher and the Student in a Writing Conference

The Role of the Teacher and the Student in a Writing Conference	
The Teacher's Role	The Student's Role
<i>In the first part of the conversation:</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invite the child to set an agenda for the conference. • Ask assessment questions. • Read the student's writing. • Make a teaching decision. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set the agenda for the conference by describing her writing work. • Respond to her teacher's research questions by describing her writing work more deeply.
<i>In the second part of the conversation:</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give the student critical feedback. • Teach the student. • Nudge the student to say how she can use what has been taught. • Link the conference to the student's independent work. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen carefully to her teacher's feedback and teaching. • Ask questions to clarify and deepen her understanding of her teacher's feedback and teaching. • Attempt to apply what her teacher has taught her. • Commit to trying what her teacher has taught her after the conference.

This chart is adapted from my book *How's It Going? A Practical Guide to Conferencing with Student Writers* (2000).

FIGURE 7.3

1. We ask an open-ended question that invites the child to set the conference agenda (*How's it going?* or *What are you doing as a writer today?*). The student's response is our first opportunity to find an assessment focus. In my conference with Smith, I asked, "What are you doing with your essay today?" Smith's reply ("making corrections") was too general for me to be able to identify an assessment focus.
2. We ask assessment questions. The student's responses give us information about our assessment focus, or if we don't yet have a focus, help us identify one. In my conference with Smith, I asked what he meant by "making corrections." Smith told me he wanted to revise by adding some "new stuff" to the "important parts." My assessment focus then became what

Smith knew about developing the parts of his essay. To gather more information, I asked, "What do you want me to understand after I read your finished essay?" His response, "That problems can happen if you forget how to speak your other language," showed me he had an idea he was trying to get across.

3. We read the student's writing. If we still haven't decided on an assessment focus, we should be able to after this. When I read Smith's draft, I saw it had the main components of a personal essay. He had an idea (that learning a second language can cause problems in one's family) and a personal story (a time when he was trying to explain his homework to his mother). I also noticed he had written just three sentences in the narrative part of his essay and had not written his idea very clearly.

4. We decide, based on what we've learned, what to teach the child that will help him become a better writer. At this point in my conference with Smith, I knew his plan to work on the parts of his essay was a good one. Having noticed that he had barely developed the story of trying to explain his homework to his mother, I decided to teach him how important it is to develop the parts of an essay that help him make his point.

The Second Part

In the second part of the conference conversation, we talk with students about how to be better writers. Our goal is to teach them something about writing that helps them grow as writers. We have four responsibilities here:

1. We give the students feedback, pointing out what we noticed about their work and telling them what we're going to teach them. In my conference with Smith, I gave him feedback about his knowledge of the genre. I told him he had a story and an idea in his essay, the components of this kind of writing. And I told him that he had written just three sentences about the time he had tried to explain his homework to his mother.
2. We teach. In my conference with Smith, I taught him something about structure, an aspect of writing well. I explained that in a personal essay, it's important for writers to develop their stories to help readers understand their ideas.
3. We ask the student to have a go—to attempt to apply what he's just learned. That is, we nudge the student to talk

through how he can use what we've taught him. This assisted performance, which Katie Wood Ray (1999) calls "writing in the air," gives students the confidence to continue trying out what we've taught them once the conference is over. In this part of my conference with Smith, I asked him to tell me more about trying to explain his homework to his mother. With my assistance, he was able to stretch out this part of his essay orally.

4. We link the conference to the student's independent writing, letting him know we expect him to try what we've taught. We might say, "I'll check back with you in ten minutes to see how you're doing," or "Would you show me what you've done later in the period?" To end my conference with Smith, I told him that I expected he would now work on stretching out the story part of his essay: "Instead of just three sentences, see if you can tell the story of you and your mom and the homework with more sentences." I also connected what I wanted him to do with my teaching point: "The better you tell that story, the better I'm going to understand what you're trying to tell me about losing Spanish."

In Conferences, We Show That We Care About Students as Writers—and as People

In the end, the success of a conference often rests on the extent to which students sense that we are interested in them as writers—and as people. We enter into most conversations because we care about the person with whom we're talking. Donald Graves (2003) believes the most important thing about a conference is the look of expectation on the teacher's face—the look that communicates that she expects the student to be writing about something interesting, and to be doing interesting work as a writer.

With all the pressure we feel today as teachers to raise test scores and get students to meet standards, it's all too easy to forget to communicate how much we care about them as people and as writers. It's easy to see only the work and not the young writers who are doing it. In my conference with Smith, I hope he saw a look of expectation on my face as I talked with him. I hope he felt that I was interested in—and concerned about—what he was saying from how I listened when he told me about "losing Spanish" and from how I responded: "So you're writing about a change in you that makes you worry about your relationships with your family?" Likewise, I hope he felt that I was intensely interested in the work he was planning to do as a writer.

In general, we show students we care about them by how we talk with them about their topics and their writing. When we ask *How's it going?* at the beginning of conferences, students can hear in our tone of voice and see by the expression on our face that we really are interested in how their writing is going. As conferences unfold, we listen intently to everything students tell us about what they're doing, because we're genuinely curious to learn more about their work.

By truly listening as we confer with children about their writing, we let them know that the work they're doing matters. It's the way we listen, more than anything else, that will nudge our students to look at us with a smile instead of a frown when we sit down next to them. It's the way we listen that can inspire students to stretch themselves as writers. The way we listen can change students' writing lives.

TEACHER ACTION 7.1

Analyze your conferences with students.

- During writing workshop, take a few minutes after each of your writing conferences to jot down on your record-keeping form the one thing you taught in the conference.
- Prepare a transcript of a conference (either from memory or while listening to a tape recording). Label each of the conversational moves you made (inviting the child to set the conference agenda, asking assessment questions, reading the student's writing, making a teaching decision, giving feedback, nudging the student to have a go, and linking the conference to the student's independent writing). Which of these moves do you feel you did well? Why? Which ones do you still need to work on? Why? Did you leave out one (or more) of these moves?
- Ask a colleague, your literacy coach, or your principal to observe you as you confer and then give you feedback on what he or she saw you do.
- Look at the work that students did after several conferences. What does this work tell you about the effectiveness of your conferencing? What could you do differently to achieve better results with your students?

How Do We Find an Assessment Focus in a Conference?

One of the most difficult challenges in a writing conference is identifying an assessment focus. One reason is that much of the writing on conferring—my own book included—seems to cast teachers in a passive role. We begin conferences by asking *How's it going?* and then wait for students to tell us what they're doing as writers.

But I don't in any way play a passive role. I go into every conference looking for very specific things. Ultimately, I focus on assessing one of the three aspects of a lifelong writer: initiating writing, writing well, or having an effective writing process. And in each conference, I teach something about initiating writing, writing well, or developing an effective writing process. That becomes the line of growth I nudge a child along through my conference teaching. A line of growth is an aspect of writing that I help a child get better at over time. In conferences throughout the school year, I focus on numerous lines of growth with my students, helping each of them as writers in many ways (see Figure 7.4).

Here's what goes on in my mind as I try to identify an assessment focus in a conference. After I ask *How's it going?* I listen very carefully to what a child tells me. I'm hoping to learn something about a child's initiative as a writer, about what he's doing to write well, or about his writing process. In many conferences, children give me information about one (or more) of these aspects of themselves as writers, thereby giving me at least one possible assessment focus.

But what about conferences in which a child doesn't say very much about himself as a writer? Or conferences in which what the child says isn't something I want to help him with?

Those scenarios are not disasters. I just proceed to a repertoire of assessment questions that get students to talk about different aspects of themselves as writers. For example, the question *Why are you writing this?* leads students to talk about their purposes for writing their current pieces. And the question *What does this piece need?* encourages students to talk about what they could do to write as well as possible. How do I choose which questions to ask? In many conferences, my individual learning plan for the student leads me to ask a particular assessment question. Let's say I've learned that a child doesn't have many reasons to write beyond satisfying his teacher's expectation that he write. In that case, in the next few conferences I make sure to ask him, "Why are you writing this?" I also choose assessment questions connected to the current unit of study. For example, if I've spent the last few weeks teaching students to give their writing voice by using

Student Alex

Conferences Across the Year

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12...

Trait		Line of Growth											
Initiative	Purpose	9/7								1/4			
	Audience												
Writing Well	Meaning							12/8				2/2	
	Genre knowledge		10/7										
	Structure				11/15								
	Detail									1/18			
	Voice												
Process	Conventions			10/21			11/22						
	Rehearsal												
	Drafting/revising	9/23											
	Editing									12/20			

FIGURE 7.4

certain sentence structures, I ask, "What are you doing to try to get your voice into your writing?"

A possible teaching point becomes my definite teaching point when what the child tells me about what he's doing as a writer matches a goal in that child's individual learning plan or is connected to the current (or a recent) unit of study.

Bearing in mind that we're looking for one of three specific assessment focuses when we confer, let's take a look at conferences on initiating writing, writing well, and the writing process.

Conferences on Initiating Writing

In these conferences, we teach students to see writing as a meaningful action that will *do* something for them in the world. We help students grapple with purposes for writing, genres in which they could write, or audiences for whom they might write.

Many teachers tell me that students talk much more about their writing process and what they're doing to write well than about why they're writing and for whom. I point out that students may indeed have purposes for writing and audiences in mind but don't know we want them to tell us these things. It's important that we let students know we want them to share this kind of information. One way is by presenting mini-lessons about the reasons writers write and the audiences for whom they write. Students are much more likely to imagine purposes and audiences for their writing—and talk about them—when we address these issues explicitly in our teaching.

Some of the questions I ask to prompt students to talk about their initiative as writers include

- Why are you writing this?
- Which genre are you planning to write in? Why?
- Which genre are you writing in? Why?
- Who do you hope will read this?

I had the following conference on initiating writing with Teddy, a sixth grader. Teddy's class was studying feature articles. One of the reasons Teddy's teacher decided to study this genre was so students could explore a new purpose for writing: teaching others about a topic.

Me: How's it going?

Teddy: Good.

Me: What are you doing today as a writer?

Teddy: I'm going to write about vegetables.

Me: So you're an expert on vegetables. . . .

Teddy: Yeah. They're good for you.

Me: And you want to teach people about them in your article. . . .

[*Teddy shrugs.*] I'm curious. Why do you want to write about vegetables? [*Teddy shrugs again.*] Are you really excited to write about them?

Teddy: [With surprise] No.

Mr: Teddy, I'm getting the feeling that you aren't really that interested in writing about vegetables. Am I right?

Teddy: [Sheepishly] Yeah.

Mr: Your class has read quite a few feature articles. Why do you think the authors wrote them?

Teddy: [After thinking for a moment] I don't understand the question.

Mr: Why do you think people write feature articles?

Teddy: [Shrugs] Because they know a lot about the topic?

Mr: The thing to know about feature articles is that people write them about topics they're really interested in, so they can teach others what they know. One of the reasons your class is studying feature articles is so you can experience what it's like to teach others with your writing. [*Teddy nods.*] So I'd like you to think about what you really know something about and might enjoy telling others.

Teddy: [After a moment] Well . . . football.

Mr: Football. Do you play football? Or like to watch football?

Teddy: Both.

Mr: Do you think you might want to write a feature article about something you know about football, something about football that you're really interested in?

Teddy: Yeah, like the different positions. Or maybe . . . some of the really good teams. What makes them good.

Mr: I think you're on to something. You seem much more interested in writing about football than about vegetables. You might want to list some other things you know a lot about in your notebook and then make a decision about the topic for your article. Maybe it will be something about football; maybe it will be something else you really know and care about. Remember, though, that you'll want to write a feature article about something you're really interested in and really know a lot about, so that you can really teach your readers about your topic.

Teddy: OK.

Mr: Good talking to you.

Teddy: Thanks.

In this conference, I found out that Teddy didn't seem to have any purpose for writing about his topic except to meet the requirement that he write a feature article, nor did he seem to understand why writers write feature articles. In response, I taught him about an important reason

TEACHER ACTION 7.2

Try conferences on initiating writing.

- Make it a point to ask students assessment questions that will give you information about them as initiators of writing. When you identify one of the scenarios listed in Figure 7.5, teach the corresponding lesson to the student.
- If your students don't talk as much about themselves as initiators of writing as you would like, teach a minilesson on how they might do this. Give examples of how they can talk about their purposes for writing, why they decided to write in the genre they've chosen, and the audiences for whom they're writing.

writers write in the genre, helped him find a topic in which he was genuinely interested, and helped him try out this purpose for writing. There are several different kinds of conferences focusing on initiating writing (see Figure 7.5). While I could have any one of them at any time during the school year, there are some times in which I expect to make students' initiative the assessment focus of many conferences. One is when I launch writing workshop. It's imperative to assess students' initiative as writers *right away*, identifying those students who find writing to be a meaningful activity and those who do not. Those who don't find writing meaningful will need help discovering what writing can do for them. These students are much more likely to be receptive to our teaching throughout the year if they are invested in their writing.

I also expect to have conferences on initiating writing when a class is studying a genre students haven't written in before. Requiring all the students in a class to write in one genre limits the kinds of purposes they can have. Students who have no previous experience writing in the genre may have no sense of what the genre can do for them. While the genre study gives them the opportunity to discover a new purpose for writing or a new means for realizing a purpose for which they've already written, it's nonetheless important to ask students why they're writing. If they shug or say, "Because you're telling me I have to," we need to help them find purposes that matter.

Conferences on Writing Well

In these conferences, we teach children about one of the traits of good writing. Given that there are numerous traits, one of the challenges is

Purposes for Writing	
If I learn this . . .	<p>The student isn't able to articulate why he's writing the piece he's working on.</p> <p>The student doesn't seem to be invested in writing about his topic.</p> <p>The student writes for the same purpose again and again.</p>
I might . . .	<p>Talk with the student about some of the reasons he could have for writing the piece.</p> <p>Help the student discover a worthwhile purpose for writing about the topic or help the student think of a new topic that would give him a good reason to write.</p> <p>Talk with the student about other purposes for writing and nudge the student to try writing for one of these purposes.</p>
Genre	
If I learn this . . .	<p>The student has a purpose for writing but isn't sure of which genre to use.</p> <p>The student is writing in a genre that doesn't seem like a good fit for his purpose.</p> <p>The student writes in the same genre over and over again.</p>
I might . . .	<p>Suggest genres that would be good vehicles for the student's purpose for writing.</p> <p>Help the student imagine a different genre that would better match his purpose.</p> <p>Suggest other genres the student can write in to help him experience some new purposes for writing.</p>
Audience	
If I learn this . . .	<p>The student isn't able to name an audience for whom he is writing.</p> <p>The student is writing for the same audience again and again.</p> <p>The student has an audience in mind for his piece but doesn't realize that it could be shared with other kinds of audiences.</p>
I might . . .	<p>Help the student imagine an audience—a person, group, or readers of a particular publication—to share his writing with when he is finished.</p> <p>Suggest other audiences with whom the student could share his writing.</p> <p>Talk about how a piece of writing might be shared with several different audiences and help the student imagine who those audiences could be.</p>

FIGURE 7.5 Examples of Conferences Focused on Initiating Writing

picking one on which to focus, especially when most children need help with every one of them. There are a couple of ways to decide. Sometimes the student tells us he's working on one of the traits of good writing and this trait becomes the focus of the conference. But if a student says things are going fine or that he's done, we can nudge him to tell us about what he's doing to write well by asking assessment questions like these:

- What are you doing to write well as you draft?
- How are you crafting this piece?
- What does your draft still need to be a good piece of writing?
- What did you do to write really well in your draft?
- What revisions did you make? Could you explain why you made these revisions?

When a student is editing—the final stage of the writing process, in which it makes sense to teach the child something about using conventions—we can ask one of these assessment questions:

- What kinds of edits are you making? Why?
- What kinds of errors are you discovering as you edit?

In some conferences we ask more specific questions that nudge students to talk about a particular trait of good writing (see Figure 7.6). Our individual learning plans for students will lead us to ask specific kinds of assessment questions. If I know that a student tends to write about every single part of an experience (a bed-to-bed story) instead of just the parts that help get her point across, I'll be sure to ask, "What are you trying to say in this piece?" and "How are the parts you're writing about helping you say this?" Or if I know a student isn't consistently capitalizing the first word of each sentence in his writing, I'll ask, "How are you doing with capitalizing in your draft?" in an editing conference.

We also ask these specific questions when we're focusing on a particular trait in a unit of study and expect the students in the class to be paying attention to that trait in their writing. For example, if I've spent the last week teaching minilessons about how to write with different kinds of detail—dialogue, a character's thoughts, characters' actions—I'll be sure to ask, "How are you writing with detail in your draft?" If I've given several minilessons on using semicolons, I'll ask students, "How are you using semicolons in your writing?"

When I visited Marge Coughlin's fifth-grade classroom, Marge was concerned because many of her students weren't paragraphing their writing. Therefore, I taught a minilesson on paragraphing in which I showed the class an excerpt from Jean Little's *Little by Little* (1987; see Figure 7.7) and discussed why Little paragraphed where she did.

When the Conference Is Focused on This Quality of Good Writing	These Are Specific Research Questions You Can Ask					
Meaning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are you trying to say in this piece? • What do want readers to know about your topic when they read your piece? 					
Genre	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What genre are you writing in? • In what ways is your piece like the ones we've read in this genre? 					
Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why have you included this section? • What kinds of parts have you included in this piece? • What are you trying to do in your lead? • What are you trying to do in your ending? • How is your piece organized? • Which parts are the really important ones that help you make your point? 					
Detail	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why have you included this detail? • Are there any details you don't think are necessary? • What kinds of details have you included in your piece? • Which words have you selected to help you give readers a picture of what you're talking about? 					
Voice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How have you tried to get your voice into your writing? • How have you written your sentences to give your writing voice? • How have you been using punctuation to give your writing voice? 					
Conventions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are you looking for as you edit? • What kinds of edits have you made? Why? • How have you been using semicolons [or any other punctuation mark that you've given minilessons about] in your writing? 					

Figure 7.6 Specific Research Questions We Can Ask in Conferences on Writing Well

"This is Jean Little," my new teacher told the class. She led me to a desk.

"This is Pamela, Jean," she said, smiling at the girl in the desk next to mine. I smiled at her, too.

Pamela's cheeks got pink. She looked away. I thought I knew what was wrong. She was shy. I sat down and waited for lessons to start. I was glad that reading was first.

When it was my turn to read out loud, I held the book up to my nose as usual. The other children giggled. The teacher hushed them. Then she turned to me.

"Are those your reading glasses?" she asked.

I was not sure. I snatched the glasses off and switched. But I still had to hold my book so close that my nose brushed against the page. Everybody stared. Nobody noticed my good reading.

That afternoon when the teacher left the room, Monica pointed at me.

"Look!" she crowed. "She's got black all over her nose!"

I clapped my hand to my face. The class burst into peals of laughter. They only broke off when the child nearest the door hissed, "Shh! She's coming."

When the teacher walked into the room, I longed to tell, but I didn't. I knew tattletales were despised by everyone. I spat on the corner of my handkerchief and scrubbed my short nose until it felt raw. But a red nose was better than a nose smudged with printer's ink.

The next morning nobody sat with me at break. That afternoon, Jane waved her hand before my face.

FIGURE 7.7 Excerpt from Jean Little's *Little by Little*

After the minilesson, I had a conference with Mohammed, who was writing a story about his family's vacation to Orlando, Florida (see Figure 7.8). Marge told me he needed help with paraphrasing.

ME: What are you doing as a writer today?

MOHAMMAD: Editing.

ME: How's that going?

MOHAMMAD: Good.

ME: What kinds of things are you looking for as you edit?

MOHAMMAD: I'm checking my paraphrasing.

ME: Tell me about it.

On My Vacation

On my vacation we drove all the way to Orlando Florida. It took us 16 hours to get to our hotel. We stayed at a five star hotel. The name of the hotel was Rosen Central Hotel.

The first day we went to Seaworld. We saw two shows. The first show was with killer whales. The people were standing on the whales while the whale jumped up in the air. When the show was over my whole family except for me got wet. The next show was a sea lion show. This show was really funny because they messed up so much. After that it started raining really hard but we didn't go home because it ended really quick. After the rain we went to a ride called Journey to Atlantis. We would go up and then go really fast down. My nephew started to cry.

On the second day I went to Universal Studios. We went on a lot of rides. My favorite ride was Jurassic Park. It is basically like Journey to Atlantis except that T-Rex pops out as soon as you fall. We also saw two shows in Universal Studios. One of the shows was something about Neptune and an evil guy fighting in a battle 100 centuries ago. The coolest part of the show was when the water circled around us. The second show was Matt Hoffman. . . .

FIGURE 7.8 Mohammed's First Draft

MOHAMMAD: Well . . . I've paraphrased here [pointing to his first sentence] and here [pointing to the sentence beginning "The first day . . ."] and here [pointing to the sentence beginning "On the second day . . ."].

ME: [After skimming Mohammed's draft] Why did you paraphrase in these places?

MOHAMMAD: Because . . . those were the places where new days started. ME: Well, that's smart that you did that. Writers do start new paragraphs to help let readers know that some time has gone by, like one day turning into the next. Where do you think you need to do more paraphrasing?

MOHAMMAD: [Skimming his draft] I'm not sure.

ME: That's OK. But you're right to think you should break up your story into some more paragraphs. [I take out the excerpt from Little by Little.] Here, take a look at the first part of the Jean Little piece, in which one whole day goes by. Do you see that there are a whole lot of paragraphs in this section, though? [Counting them] Eleven paragraphs, actually.

MOHAMMAD: Yeah.

Me: [Pointing] In the first paragraph, the teacher is leading Jean Little to her desk. In the second, the teacher is smiling at Pamela. In the third, Jean and Pamela are sitting next to each other at their desks. In the fourth, some time seems to have gone by, and it's Jean's turn to read aloud. Are you following me?

MOHAMMAD: Yes.

Me: I think Jean Little made a new paragraph every time something new happens in the story—a new action or when some time has gone by. Making a new paragraph is a way to let readers know that something new is happening in a story. [Mohammed nods.] Here's what I'd like you to do now. Read the part of your story that starts right here [pointing to the section beginning "The first day . . ."]. As you read, look for places where something new is happening. Stop and tell me when you find them. Those will be the places where you need to make some new paragraphs.

MOHAMMAD: OK. [He reads the section.] Well . . . here. [Reading aloud] "The next show was a sea lion show." That's something new. And this part about when it rained, that could be a paragraph.

Me: Do you see any other places where something new happens? [Mohammed shakes his head.] What about this part here? [I point to the sentence beginning "After the rain . . ."] Isn't something new happening in your story here, too?

MOHAMMAD: [Smiling] I think so.

Me: Good. There are a couple of things I want you to do when we're finished talking. Read through the rest of your piece, and keep doing what you're doing, thinking about where you need to paragraph. Remember to look for places where something new happens in the story. Something else I'm noticing is that some of your paragraphs will be just a sentence long. You might need to stretch out those paragraphs and add more detail, OK?

MOHAMMAD: OK.

Me: It was good talking with you.

MOHAMMAD: Thanks.

In this conference, I found out that while Mohammed did indeed know some reasons for paragraphing, there were others he needed to learn. In response, I used Jean Little's writing to help him learn about one of these reasons. After the conference, Mohammed reread his draft and decided to start a new paragraph in several places in his story (see Figure 7.9).

There are many kinds of conferences on writing well, each connected to one of the traits of good writing (see Figures 7.10a and 7.10b), and they make up the majority of my conferences during the school year. However, during the first few weeks of school, I have very

On My Vacation

On my vacation we drove all the way to Orlando Florida. It took us 16 hours to get to our hotel. We stayed at a five star hotel. The name of the hotel was Rosen Central Hotel.

The first day we went to Seaworld. We saw two shows. The first show was with killer whales. The people were standing on the whales while the whale jumped up in the air.

When the show was over my whole family except for me got wet.

The next show was a sea lion show. This show was really funny because they messed up so much.

After that it started raining really hard but we didn't go home because it ended really quick.

After the rain we went to a ride called Journey to Atlantis. It was a water ride. We would go up and then go really fast down. My nephew started to cry.

On the second day . . .

FIGURE 7.9 The First Part of Mohammed's Final Draft

few conferences that fall into this category; my early conferences are often geared to helping students become more invested in writing or to teaching them to use the tools and strategies they'll need to write independently (process conferences).

TEACHER ACTION 7.3

Try conferences on writing well.

- Make it a point to ask students assessment questions that will give you information about what they do to write well. When you identify one of the scenarios listed in Figures 7.10a and 7.10b, teach the corresponding lesson to that student.
- If your students don't talk as much about what they are doing to write well as you would like, present a minilesson about how to do this. Give examples of how they can talk about what they're doing or are planning to do to write their pieces as best they can.

FIGURE 7.10A Examples of Conferences on Writing Well

Meaning		Genre		Structure	
If I learn this . . .	I might . . .	<p>The student knows what she wants to say about her topic, but she hasn't communicated her point anywhere in her draft (this applies to genres in which the writer typically makes her point explicit).</p> <p>The student has tried to communicate what she wants to say about her topic in her draft, but her meaning isn't clear.</p> <p>The student isn't sure of what she wants to say in her draft.</p>	<p>Show her several model texts in the genre she's writing in and point out where in these texts the writer lets readers know her meaning.</p> <p>Nudge her to clarify her meaning in her draft.</p> <p>Ask her what she wants to say about her topic and teach her to write this in an appropriate place in her draft.</p>	<p>If I learn this . . .</p> <p>I might . . .</p>	<p>The student knows about some of the features of the genre she's writing in but not others.</p> <p>The student knows some things about a feature of the genre she's writing in, but there's more to learn about this feature.</p>
If I learn this . . .	I might . . .	<p>The student has included sections that don't seem to help develop her meaning.</p> <p>The student gives equal weight to all sections of her piece.</p> <p>The order of the sections in a student's piece seems random.</p> <p>The student knows to grab the reader's attention in her lead, but she doesn't let readers know where she's going in the rest of the piece.</p> <p>In nonnarrative genres, the student abruptly shifts from one section to another.</p>	<p>Teach her to delete unnecessary sections or to rewrite these sections so that they do help develop her meaning.</p> <p>Teach her to stretch the parts of the piece that best develop her meaning.</p> <p>Teach the student to order her piece by time (in a narrative) or by logic (in nonnarrative genres).</p> <p>Teach the student how to write a lead that states her meaning or puts the reader on a path toward meaning.</p> <p>Teach the student to use subheadings or to write topic sentences that signal the shift from one section to the next.</p>	If I learn this . . .	I might . . .

Details			
If I learn this . . .		I might . . .	
<p>The student includes details that don't develop her meaning.</p> <p>There is little detail in the student's piece that helps develop her meaning.</p> <p>The student relies on just one or two kinds of details in her piece.</p> <p>The student's sentences are very simple in structure.</p> <p>The student uses very general nouns and/or verbs.</p>		<p>Teach her to delete extraneous details.</p> <p>Show her how to add detail that develops her meaning.</p> <p>Teach her about other kinds of details that writers use in this genre.</p> <p>Teach the student to combine simple sentences into more complex sentences.</p> <p>Teach her to use more specific nouns and/or verbs.</p>	
Voice			
If I learn this . . .		I might . . .	
<p>The student's writing lacks voice because she relies on the same sentence structures throughout the piece.</p> <p>The student relies on just a few kinds of punctuation marks.</p> <p>The student's writing sounds like anyone could have written it.</p>		<p>Teach her new sentence structures (by looking at sentences in a model text) that will increase her repertoire of sentence types and help give her writing voice.</p> <p>Show the student how some new punctuation marks (ellipses, commas, dashes, etc.) can signal to a reader how she wants the piece to be read.</p> <p>Teach the student to include details in her writing that define who she is as an individual.</p>	
Conventions			
If I learn this . . .		I might . . .	
<p>The student is not punctuating a certain kind of sentence correctly (e.g., a compound sentence).</p> <p>The student is not yet using a particular kind of punctuation mark correctly (e.g., quotation marks).</p> <p>The student doesn't understand a grammatical convention (e.g., she uses <i>me</i> as the subject instead of <i>I</i>).</p> <p>The student misspells frequently used words.</p>		<p>Teach the student how this sentence is conventionally punctuated.</p> <p>Point out in a model text how a writer uses the punctuation mark.</p> <p>Teach the student how to use the grammatical convention correctly.</p> <p>Give the student a list of the frequently used words that she misspells and have her use the list to help her write these words correctly.</p>	

FIGURE 7.10B Examples of Conferences on Writing Well

Process Conferences

In a process conference, we help a child develop a more effective writing process, perhaps teaching him how to use a writing tool (such as a writer's notebook or the cut-and-paste function of a word-processing program) or a writing strategy (such as making a plan for a piece or rereading a draft).

There are several reasons we can decide to have a process conference with a student. Sometimes, when I ask a student *How's it going?* she tells me what stage of the writing process she's in ("I'm pre-writing") and what tool or strategy she's using ("I'm making a plan for my piece"). Teaching her something about how to use the tool or strategy then often becomes the focus of the conference.

In other conferences, a student tells me what he's doing to write well ("I'm adding detail"). As I talk to him and look at his writing, I may realize that he needs to learn how to use a particular strategy ("Reread your piece, and stop at the end of each sentence to think about whether it makes sense to add a line of dialogue") to help him write well in the way he is attempting.

Sometimes we need to ask students assessment questions to nudge them to talk about their writing process:

- Where are you in the writing process—rehearsing? Drafting? Revising? Editing?
- What are you doing as you're rehearsing? Drafting? Revising? Editing?
- How are you doing the work you're doing?
- What tools are you using as you write? How is each tool helping you write well?
- What strategies are you using as you write? How are these strategies helping you write well?

Sometimes we need to ask specific questions to gather information about how students are using particular tools and strategies. Often these questions are based on the goals we've written down for these students on their individual learning plans. If I've written down, "Help Amanda with planning," then I'll be sure to ask her, "Have you made a plan?" the next time she's getting ready to draft or has just started a draft. Or if I've devoted a series of recent minilessons to teaching a tool or strategy, I'll ask students if they're using it in their writing and how it's going. If I've taught the class how to box out their drafts during revision—circle the sections of a draft to help them focus on each part—I'll ask, "Did you try boxing out your draft?" and/or "How has boxing out your draft helped you revise it?"

One afternoon I visited Dawn Walsh's third-grade class when they were in the middle of a poetry unit. In recent minilessons, Dawn had

Fox
Creeping in the bushes
Fur as red as a rose,
his eyes transfixed on a
chipmunk,
Then,
at the last second
pounces,
and swallows in one
Gulp!

FIGURE 7.11 First Draft of Caleb's Poem

been teaching that one reason poets end lines—that is, make line breaks—is to cue their readers to pause slightly in their reading. In my minilesson that day, I showed how poets put spaces between lines—that is, add white space—for the same reason. After the minilesson I had a process conference with Caleb, who was working on a poem about a fox hunting prey (see Figure 7.11).

Mr: Hi, Caleb, how's it going? What are you doing with your poem? Caleb: I don't know. I think I could use a lot more line breaks and white space.

Mr: Sounds as if you're thinking you might want to craft your poem by working on your line breaks and white space.

Caleb: Yeah.

Mr: How are you going to do this?

Caleb: [After reading the poem to himself] I think I'm going to put a line break . . . one's going to go there [pointing to the space after the word eyes on the third line].

Mr: OK . . . why do you want to do that?

Caleb: Well . . . to make the reader read it like it's really happening . . . like they're watching it.

Mr: You want to sound like it's happening, so you're going to make some shorter lines to put in pauses and slow the poem down.

Caleb: Yeah.

Mr: And what else . . . you said you want to use some more white space, too?

Caleb: Yeah. [Reading] "At the last second / pounces" . . . white space right there.

Mr: After the word *pounces*?

CALRB: Yeah.

MR: Caleb, could you read your poem to me?

CALRB: Sure. [*He reads the poem aloud dramatically.*]

MR: Well, I think you've got some good plans for this poem. What I like about this poem about the fox is that it gives a really dramatic image of a fox creeping up on this chipmunk and all of a sudden it pounces on it and—gulp!—the chipmunk is history. [*Caleb smiles.*] So you want the poem to sound like it's happening when people read it. You know, when you read the poem, it sounded just like that—you read it slowly, with a lot of pauses, just the way a fox would creep up gradually on a chipmunk. But I noticed that when you read it aloud, you paused in places where you're not planning on putting line breaks and white space. When I've got a draft of a poem, I read the poem out loud and listen for the places where my voice pauses. If it's a short pause, I'll try a line break at that point. If it's a longer, more dramatic pause, I might add some white space right there.

CALRB: OK.

MR: Try reading it again, and this time listen for where your voice pauses. [*Caleb reads the poem aloud a second time.*] What did you hear?

CALRB: I'm going to read it again. [*He does.*]

MR: What did you hear?

CALRB: Maybe . . . [*reading*] "At the last second" . . . white space . . . "pounces" . . . then white space again . . . "and swallows" . . . then a line break right there, after "swallows."

MR: Wow. This is a really dramatic part of your poem, where the fox is pouncing on the chipmunk. Putting white space before and after the word *pounces* and the line break after *swallows* really slows the poem up there, and helps create a feeling of tension and drama. I think you've got some good ideas.

CALRB: Yeah.

MR: Why don't you read the poem out loud a couple of more times and listen for pauses that tell you where you might break more lines and add more white space.

CALRB: OK.

MR: I can't wait to see what you come up with.

In this conference, I found out Caleb knew that line breaks and white space help guide the way a reader reads a poem. But he didn't seem to have a strategy that would enable him to hear where he wanted to break his lines and use white space. In response, I taught him the strategy of reading his poem aloud and listening for where he paused. After the conference was over, Caleb reread his poem and, using this

strategy, found a way to use line breaks and white space to signal to readers how to read his poem (see Figure 7.12).

There are numerous kinds of process conferences (see Figure 7.13). Although I have process conferences throughout the school year, most of my conferences during the first month of school are about the writing process. One of the goals of launching a writing workshop is to help students write independently, so that we don't need to take time each day to explain to students what they should be doing. Therefore, they need to develop a repertoire of writing tools and strategies. In my early conferences I teach students what they need to do to navigate the various stages of the writing process.

Once my students are able to move through the writing process with a degree of independence, the focus of my conferences shifts to helping them write well. As students begin to try out what I've taught them about writing well in minilessons and conferences, I often need to teach them a strategy to help them use these lessons in their writing. Caleb is a good example. He understood the *why* of line breaks and white space but needed help with the *how*. Conferences with students who understand an aspect of writing well but not how to apply that concept as they write become process conferences.

FIGURE 7.12 Second Draft of Caleb's Poem

Rox
Creeping in the brushcs
fur red as a rose,
his blood-curdling eyes
transfixcd on a chipmunk
then,
at the last second
springs,
into the crisp air and
swiftly hits the ground
with a loud thump
and
swallows in one
Gulp.

Rehearsal	
If I learn this . . .	<p>The student has a topic but isn't sure about what he wants to say about his topic.</p> <p>The student knows his topic and has a sense of what he wants to say but, when asked, seems short on specifics of his topic.</p> <p>The student is ready to plunge into a draft, but he hasn't done much thinking about how the draft will go.</p>
I might . . .	<p>Ask him to freewrite in his writer's notebook in response to the question, <i>What do I want to say about my topic?</i></p> <p>Have the student write several entries in his writer's notebook in order to gather some of the details he will need to write well about his topic.</p> <p>Teach the student to make a plan for his writing—a flowchart, a web, or an outline.</p>
Drafting and Revising	
If I learn this . . .	<p>The student is having trouble getting back into his draft when he returns to it each day.</p> <p>The student is trying to craft a part of his draft (the lead, a scene, a topic sentence, an ending, etc.) but isn't sure of how to do it well.</p> <p>The student wants to add to his draft but doesn't have room on his paper to do this work.</p> <p>The student isn't sure that he's done a good job with an aspect of his draft—his lead, the amount of detail in a section, his tone, the specificity of his words, and so on.</p>
I might . . .	<p>Teach the student to reread his draft before he tries to write each day.</p> <p>Have the student look at a model text to get an image of how to craft his writing in the way he wishes.</p> <p>Teach him a revision strategy that will allow him to add on to his draft—carets, arrows, footnotes, sticky notes, spiderlegs (taping strips of paper to the side of the draft).</p> <p>Have the student read his writing to a writing partner or response group to get feedback.</p>
Editing	
If I learn this . . .	<p>The student edits by reading his writing to himself.</p> <p>After self-editing, careless errors remain in the student's draft.</p> <p>There are certain words the student has trouble spelling.</p>
I might . . .	<p>Teach the student how reading his writing aloud can help him hear missing words or errors in punctuation.</p> <p>Teach the student how to have an effective peer conference to get help in identifying careless errors.</p> <p>Help the student create a list of these trouble-some words to refer to when he edits.</p>

Figure 7.13 Examples of Conferences on the Writing Process

TEACHER ACTION 7.4

Try a process conference.

- Make a point to ask students assessment questions that will give you information about their writing process. When you identify one of the scenarios listed in Figure 7.13, teach the corresponding lesson to that student.
- If your students don't talk as much about their writing processes as you would like, present a minilesson about how to do this. Give examples of what they can say about the stage of the writing process they're in and the tools and strategies they're using in that stage.

How Do We Decide What to Teach a Student in a Conference?

Once we've identified our assessment focus, we're on the path to making a decision about what to teach the student with whom we're conferring. In the instant that we figure out the focus, we ask ourselves two questions:

- What have I learned so far in this conference about what the student knows about this aspect of writing?
- What do I still need to learn about what the student knows about this aspect of writing to help me make my teaching decision?

The first question pushes us to make sense of what we have learned so far about the student as a writer from his responses to both the open-ended *How's it going?* and our more specific assessment questions. If we needed to look at the child's writing to help us find a focus for the conference, then we have learned some things about the child from that source of information, too.

The second question pushes us to gather more information about the child. We might want to ask more assessment questions about the aspect of writing on which we're focusing. Or if we haven't yet looked at the child's writing, we'll want to do that to gather more information about what the student knows.

Ultimately, our goal in asking these two questions is to help figure out where a child is as a writer on the line of growth the conference is focusing on and what the appropriate next step for him as a writer should be to move him forward on this line.

Let's take another look at the first few minutes of the conference I had with Teddy. This time, I'll include the thinking I was doing as the conference unfolded.

Mr: How's it going?

Teddy: Good.

Mr: What are you doing today as a writer?

Teddy: I'm going to write about vegetables.

Mr: So you're an expert on vegetables. . . .

Teddy: Yeah. They're good for you.

Mr: And you want to teach people about them in your article. . . .

[*Teddy shrugs.*]

Teddy's shrug is the first clue that he doesn't have a purpose for writing about his topic that really matters to him. I decide to ask Teddy some assessment questions about his reasons for choosing his topic.

Mr: I'm curious. Why do you want to write about vegetables? [*Teddy shrugs again.*] Are you really excited to write about them?

Teddy: [*With surprise*] No.

Mr: Teddy, I'm getting the feeling that you aren't really that interested in writing about vegetables. Am I right?

Teddy: [*Sheepishly*] Yeah.

At this point I decide to make Teddy's initiative as a writer the focus of the conference. So far, I've learned that Teddy isn't invested in writing about the topic he's chosen. To help me decide what to teach Teddy about the purposes he could have, I need to know what he knows about the purposes for writing a feature article. So I ask him.

Mr: Your class has read quite a few feature articles. Why do you think the authors wrote them?

Teddy: [*After thinking for a moment*] I don't understand the question. Mr: Why do you think people write feature articles?

Teddy: [*Shrugs*] Because they know a lot about the topic?

While Teddy is right that feature article writers know a lot about their topic, he doesn't seem to understand that these writers write to share what they know with others. Thus, I decide I want Teddy to learn about this purpose for writing. To do this, I need to help Teddy find a topic on which he really is an expert and about which he is genuinely enthusiastic. By writing about such a topic and sharing his finished article with readers—his classmates—Teddy has the best chance of learning that he can teach others through writing. That becomes the focus of teaching in the rest of the conference.

Let's also take another look at the first few minutes of the conference with Mohammed. Even though this conference had a different focus—writing well—I still went through the same assessment process in my mind.

Ms: What are you doing as a writer today?

Mohammed: Editing.

Ms: How's that going?

Mohammed: Good.

Ms: What kinds of things are you looking for as you edit?

Mohammed: I'm checking my paragraphing.

At this point I decide to focus the conference on paragraphing. I'm able to make such a quick decision in part because I had given a minilesson on paragraphing at the beginning of the writing workshop and also because Mohammed's teacher told me that he needs some help with paragraphing. Since all I've learned so far is that Mohammed is going to think about paragraphing when he edits, I need to get him to explain what he knows about the reasons for paragraphing. I also need to look at his writing to see where he's paragraphed.

Ms: Tell me about it.

Mohammed: Well . . . I've paragraphed here [*pointing to his first sentence*] and here [*pointing to the sentence beginning "The first day . . ."*] and here [*pointing to the sentence beginning "On the second day . . ."*].

Ms: [*After skimming Mohammed's draft*] Why did you paragraph in these places?

Mohammed: Because . . . those were the places where new days started. Ms: Well, that's smart that you did that. Writers do start new paragraphs to help let readers know that some time has gone by, like one day turning into the next.

I've now learned that Mohammed has written several paragraphs in his first draft, each of which signals a major time shift—a new day. Looking at his writing, I also see places where he should start new paragraphs to signal other, smaller time shifts. I'm curious whether Mohammed knows that he can use paragraphs to signal minor time shifts, so I ask him where else he's planning to paragraph.

Where do you think you need to do more paragraphing?

Mohammed: [*After skimming his draft*] I'm not sure.

Now I have enough information. I decide to teach Mohammed that paragraphs can signal minor time shifts to readers.

TEACHER ACTION 7.5

Analyze the assessment work you do in conferences.

- Have a fellow teacher or your literacy coach join you during writing workshop. When you think you've identified a focus for a conference, stop and say something to your colleague about what you've learned so far and what you feel you still need to learn about the student to make a teaching decision. Once you feel that you've gathered enough information, stop once again and tell your colleague what you've decided to teach the student.

- Prepare a transcript of a conference (either from memory or while listening to a tape recording). Underline the place at which you identified a focus for the conference and also the places at which you obtained the information you needed to make your teaching decision.

As you see, there's a lot to think about during the first few moments of a writing conference! This thinking isn't haphazard or random. Once I find a focus for the conference, I think carefully about what I've learned so far about the child and then gather more information. My teaching decisions flow logically out of this information-gathering process.

If you're new to teaching writing—or even if you've been teaching writing for several years—it may be intimidating to peek inside a more experienced writer's mind like this. As you have more and more conferences, however, you'll find that your current students resemble the students you've taught in previous years. Conference assessment becomes a matter of recognizing patterns—the typical ways students write at the grade level you teach. Over time, the process will feel more and more intuitive and automatic. In almost all your conferences, you'll be able to figure out where you're going to take a student quickly and feel confident that you've made an accurate assessment and a good teaching decision.

Reflecting on the Child's Individual Learning Plan After the Conference

Years ago, I heard Lucy Calkins say that our role as teachers in a writing conference is to change a child's life as a writer forever. She meant

Reflect on how your conferences change how you see your students as writers. Review several of your record-keeping forms for students in your writing workshop, paying particular attention to the notes you took about your writing conferences with them. Which conferences led you to understand aspects of your students as writers in deeper ways? Which conferences led you to think about aspects of your students as writers that you hadn't assessed before the conferences?

the same thing as when she says that we teach the writer, not the writing. That is, we teach a child about an aspect of writing—a purpose for writing, a craft technique, a writing strategy, a language convention—that she can use in the piece she's currently working on and, more important, whenever she writes in the future, for the rest of her life. I've come to believe that our lives as teachers should also be changed forever by what happens in a writing conference. What we learn about a child should change how we see her as a writer. We should end most conferences knowing something we didn't know before about a child's initiative as a writer, about what she does to write well, and/or about her writing process. And what we learn should lead us to reflect on the individual learning plan we've constructed for her based on previous conferences and her earlier writing. When a conference is over, a few questions nudge me to think about this child's individual learning plan:

- What did I learn that confirms one or more of the learning goals I have for this child? And how does what I learned help me understand more about what this child needs to learn?
- What did I learn that leads me to set some new learning goals for this child?

Once I've come up with answers to these questions, I jot them down on my record-keeping form. Figure 7.14 contains the notes I wrote down after my conference with Smith. Besides the things I learned about Smith's knowledge of structure, I also learned about his willingness to revise (an aspect of process) and intuited the purpose he had for writing (an aspect of initiative). As a goal for future conferences, I made a note to help him learn to stretch the parts of a piece that develop meaning. I also jotted down that to be able to develop a story, he would need to learn about narrative details—dialogue, thoughts, actions.

Assessment Notes For <u>Smith</u>	
Dates <u>1/5</u>	
What am I learning about this student as a writer?	<p>1/5 "Losing Spanish"</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - personal essay - meaning: "problems happen when you forget your own language" - clear & strong sections - want to add to "important parts" - story = 3 sentences ⑦ "show" your point by developing narrative part
What do I need to teach this student?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⑥ "stretch" parts that develop meaning ⑥ communicate meaning clearly ⑥ range of narrative detail

FIGURE 7.14 Assessment Notes for Smith

My conference with Smith affected how I saw him as a writer. The goals I created for him would affect future conferences with him. And in those future conferences, there would be more to learn about him as a writer and more goals to set for him. Over the course of the school year, the individual learning plan for Smith would become more and more detailed and be more and more a help in guiding the assessment and decision-making process in future conferences.